DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 211 145 JC 810 649

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TITLE Why Miami-Dade Community College Is Reforming the Educational Program.
INSTITUTION Miami-Dade Community Coll., Fla.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 7p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement; *Academic Standards; Access to Education; *College Planning; *College Role; *Community Colleges; *Educational Change; *Educational Objectives; Program Development; Two Year Colleges
IDENTIFIERS *Miami Dade Community College FL

ABSTRACT

Profound changes have taken place in American community colleges in the last three decades. During the late 1960s, a desire to remove social inequities and to increase social mobility brought about a general educational liberalization which broadened access to education and limited constraints on passage through the educational system. Falling educational standards in the 1970s, however, led to increased public dissatisfaction and an unwillingness to continue funding at previous levels. To reconcile the conflicting demands of academic excellence and open access constitutes the major challenge to educational policy for the 1980s. In the face of this challenge, in 1975, Miami-Dade Community College (MDCC) undertook a three-year study which concluded that a systematic reform of its educational program was necessary to continue the "open door" policy while strengthening academic standards. Six directions for college policy were taken: (1) increased expectations of student performance; (2) more information provided to students on their performance; (3) greater college direction; (4) variable time and variable service programs for students; (5) a commitment to maintain standards; and (6) the suspension of students whose performance is inadequate. This rationale for the reform of MDCC's program is appended by a summary presentation of evidence of improved student performance seen one year after the educational reforms were implemented. (HB)

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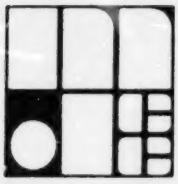

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March 1981

WHY MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS REFORMING THE EDUCATIONAL PROGRAM

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During the past three decades, American community colleges have admirably met the challenge of providing expanded access to postsecondary education. They developed new opportunities for individuals, who had previously been excluded, to receive the training and education necessary to participate fully in the society. The technical developments of American industry during World War II produced dramatic shifts in the mix of occupations, the number of unskilled jobs declined sharply while the number of skilled, semi-professional, and professional jobs expanded sharply. These changes permitted more individuals to attain middle-income status, while drastically increasing the education required for employability. A new institution was required, one that would be responsive and flexible in meeting these greater educational needs; and the community college evolved to fill that requirement. Thus, these institutions became the principal vehicle of the "access revolution" that has since dominated American higher education.

Following World War II, the federal government engaged in higher education policy formulation in a more substantial way by supporting college education for returning war veterans through the G.I. Bill. This bill provided veterans the resources to attend college, and left it up to the states and others to fund operational expenses. Coincidentally, there existed at the time a perfect match between new career opportunities and expanded access. During one period, new community colleges were opening at a rate of one per week and higher education enrollment tripled in a single decade. Community colleges became the institutions for individuals with limited resources, and for the "new student". These institutions were eminently practical, structuring programs to respond directly to current job opportunities, or to parallel the first two years of baccalaureate programs. Without the binding traditions of the universities the community colleges were able to react spontaneously. Programs and teaching strategies were rapidly adjusted to the needs of the communities and the continually changing student body. Because of this adaptive flexibility, the community colleges made enormous contributions to the dramatically changing American society. They became the most important educational institution of the mid-twentieth century.

During the late 1960s, important changes took place. The nation struggled to overcome the impact of a history of racial discrimination, and to provide equality and civil rights for all Americans. In response, the community colleges strove to offer expanded opportunity to all who wished to enter. The institutions placed emphasis on the removal of barriers and on assisting individuals to get through the system. There was continued concern for the relevance of programs to the new students.

As a reflection of the travails of the larger society, individuals within colleges demanded more rights, more opportunity to develop their own directions, and greater freedom from convention. There was mistrust of any authority. Much was said about the individual's right to fail; self-advisement became a common practice; and often all courses, regardless of content, were counted toward graduation. Students objected to placement in remedial courses or other perceived constraints; and unusual credit courses on a wide range of topics appeared in the curriculum. Procedures considered to be barriers to admission and registration, including post admission testing, were removed. The focus was on assisting students to gain certification and to achieve a sense of immediate gratification. Often there was not equal focus on the skills or competencies acquired. The key became the credential rather than achievement. Many students progressed through the entire system, from kindergarten to graduate school, without being required to meet eductional standards similar to those of earlier years. Perhaps this situation grew in reaction to the concern of many minorities that the educational system did not provide a ladder to success, but rather created discriminatory screening mechanisms which were used to prevent them from acquiring the credentials necessary to fully participate in society. All systems appeared to be geared to inhibit minorities and the disadvantaged from advancement. In retrospect, it is easy to see that there was some overreaction to these valid concerns in the nation and in higher education.

Simply making it easier to gain credentials was not the answer. Along with many others, I participated fully in decisions consistent with what is described above. In the context of conditions in our nation in the late 1960s, I still believe it was probably the right thing to do. Many Americans, previously excluded, were among those who became credentialed and thus able to compete for professional positions for the first time. Still we remain a very long way from equal opportunity for all. The approaches of the 1960s are not the answer today.

Throughout the decade of the 1970s, new factors impacted the world of education. A decline in funding support began, and with it came decreases in student support services. Students were left with less assistance in proceeding through programs, while access continued to broaden, and student diversity expanded in every attribute. The same pressures that had changed postsecondary education also dramatically changed the elementary and secondary schools. As more individuals remained through high school and the curriculum expanded, less attention was given to basic academic skills and student expectations were lowered. A pattern developed in which inadequately prepared students were graduated each year, and entered society or higher education without the skills necessary to compete and achieve. Not surprisingly, as a result of this pattern, the public attitude toward education became very negative. Elementary and secondary schools have been branded a failure, and

and there is growing disillusionment with postsecondary education. Evidence abounds that public rejection of the quality of elementary and secondary programs now includes community colleges. The growing interest in testing as a requisite for transfer to the upper division provides a clear indication of the lack of trust of our programs and our standards.

Community colleges currently face a dilemma which mirrors our society. It is becoming clear that there exists a paradox between the goal of equal opportunity for all, and the growing feeling on the part of many Americans that taxpayers can no longer afford to support all of the social programs designed to attain this goal. Many feel that the social programs attempted in recent decades have been ineffective, and have placed too great a burden on middle-income Americans. Further, there is a widely held belief that many individuals are taking advantage of social programs by accepting funds without putting forth the effort to improve themselves that should be expected. Evidence of this dissatisfaction is reflected at the community college level in the current demand by the public for higher standards and serious questioning of the efficacy of open door policies. To compound the problem the greater emphasis on quality and standards has been concurrent to striking decline in the academic skills of entering college students. Scholastic Aptitude Test scores have declined each year since 1968 and the percentage of students with scores below 400 has increased from 29.8 to 42. Evidence suggests that the slide in academic skills has been accelerating. The performance of 1980 graduates on tests normed in 1975 is more than a scholastic year lower. Placement tests at Miami-Dade Community College indicate that 50% of all entering students are deficient in at least one basic skill area.

Clearly, the single greatest task for community colleges for the 1980s must be to resolve the dilemma of the need for higher standards and increasingly serious academic deficiencies among entering students — to confront and meet the challenge of maintaining both access and excellence.

The tremendous increase in federal student financial aid which has occurred in recent years is a most important development, and requires special attention. It is not uncommon at colleges today for more than half of the full-time students to receive federal financial aid. At Miami-Dade, the number of students receiving Basic Educational Opportunity Grants has increased from less than 300 in 1973-74 to over 12,000 today; and the total dollars involved have increased from less than $100,000 to nearly $10 million. To be blunt, colleges were caught unprepared for the rapid shift in federal financial aid policy, and did not foresee the impact of a majority of students on financial assistance. The institutions were operating the unstructured programs evolved during the 1960s when federal programs made large numbers of additional students eligible for financial aid. Controls were inadequate and serious problems developed. Other factors further complicated the situation. After Vietnam, some veterans took the position that they had earned whatever benefits were offered, and that receiving these benefits should not necessarily require that classes be attended, or that there be academic achievement. This attitude was a factor in other students enrolling. Numbers of other students remained only for the financial aid benefits.

Another serious problem which complicates operation for community colleges is the enrollment-driven funding. Enrollment-driven formulas were developed to cope with rapid growth. They were generous during the great expansion of the 1950s and 1960s, as they provided full funding for additional enrollment and permitted virtually instant program development to the great benefit of the expanding community college. These formulas promoted daring administrative decisions, by so adequately funding implementation that the successes were many and the errors were buried in new income. The same factors that made enrollment-driven funding advantageous during expansion (incremental growth costs, time lag, building facilities, lower cost of new personnel, etc.) make it a decisive disadvantage in decline. During periods of decline, overhead per student increases, existing facilities provide more rather than fewer square feet per student, and higher salaried individuals are maintained while lower salaried persons are released or not added. Errors now are magnified rather than buried. Any decrease in student population brings proportionate reduction of support without proportionate reduction in cost. As a result, the colleges have become entrapped by an essential need to sustain enrollment in order to remain economically viable. Often this need shapes educational programs and institutional priorities.

Where are the community colleges as the decade of the 1980s begins? We have developed policies that were useful ten years ago but, in many cases, are no longer effective. Too often there is free flow of students to any courses they wish to attend, regardless of preparation and without adequate information, advice, or support. At the same time the populations being served are more diverse, the programs much more complex, and the choices more confusing to students. The decline in academic skills of entering students cannot be effectively accommodated by the model developed in the 1960s. This has become a major factor contributing to problems of faculty morale, and to the overall decline in standards. Community colleges have worked hard to help faculty members develop skills for individualization of instruction, but the range of skills in many classes has become too great. Faculty are assigned to class situations where neither they nor the students have a good opportunity to succeed. This is a disservice to all concerned, and precludes the establishment of an effective learning environment. In addition, the concentration of attention required by the problems of less skilled has resulted in little attention for the more skilled, and a growing frustration over program quality and the lack of capability to deal with superior students.

With the substantial increase in financial aid recipients, and little control of student flow, there are many students who now remain in the institution making little or no progress. Others advance without the necessry skills and competencies, either because standards are not maintained or there is improper course configuration for a degree. In my opinion, many students have been passing through the entire educational system, from kindergarten through graduate school, without being asked for their best, and without reaching acceptable levels of achievement. In short, what we have been doing simply isn't working—it has failed to meet the needs of both our students and society.

K. Patricia Cross states it well. "The problem came when we lost sight of the purpose of access—which was not to permit students to enter colleges but to enable

them to learn . . . It might be said that there is no true equality until each student is offered the right to do his or her best. Sad to say, we have not been offering that right to either high-achieving or low-achieving students. Denial of the opportunity to take pride in one's accomplishment is a serious infringement on educational rights. And where standards have been compromised, students are denied the very basic human right to feel good about themselves and their accomplishments."

In this environment the community college becomes particularly vulnerable. The public questions the open door concept, and universities express concern over the competence of students proceeding to the upper division. The paradox of declining academic skills and a concurrent requirement for higher standards has set up the community colleges for failure. However, we cannot afford to fail, nor can the nation permit failure. The open door must be preserved, for many Americans still begin life with serious handicaps, and a multitude of factors in society work to compound these handicaps. At present, the public school systems are changing their curriculum and their attitudes, but it appears that major change will be slow. So for many years to come, American higher education will see large numbers of young people who do not have the skills required for full participation in society, and who must look to the community college for their last opportunity to succeed. The nation must help these individuals become productive, contributing members of the society rather than burdens to it, and community colleges must continue to play a key role.

In light of the foregoing analysis of the current status, Miami-Dade Community College undertook a three-year study. The conclusion was that it was essential to undertake systemic reformation of the college educational program to permit the continuation of the open door together with the strengthening of standards. The reform began in 1978 and all components should be in place by the end of the 1981-82 college year. The following are the directions:

1. The college is increasing expectations of students. Everyone is a public community college is, in effect, on scholarship, as the state or local taxpayers pay a large share of the cost of the programs. In addition, more than half of the full-time students in many institutions receive direct aid from the federal government. Students must understand the obligation that accompanies this aid. The public is investing in them in the belief that their development will improve society. The students themselves want to take pride in their achievements and to know that they are making important gains with the time that they invest. Research at the college indicates that students endorse the imposition of higher expectations. Most important, students will have greater achievement.
2. The college is becoming much more directive. Student flow through the system is carefully controlled. The program is carefully constructed so that students proceed through the program based on their competencies and progress. They are enrolled in courses where they have a good chance to succeed. In this more directive system, students with deficiencies are required to take necessary developmental work before proceeding to programs where the lack of skill could cause failure. The system ensures that students are assisted in selecting courses and in maintaining reasonable loads. Considerable effort is required to eliminate the problem of many students who work and carry a course load too great to permit the necessary study time. In addition, the curriculum is aligned so that students that cannot complete a program gain skills and competencies that are useful in life. Given this more directive system, faculty should be able to provide instruction to students within a narrower range of academic competence, thus increasing faculty and students opportunity for success.
3. More information is provided to students. In the past, we have been woefully inadequate in providing students consistent feedback on performance and information on programs. As we have become more directive and introduced higher expectations, we have recognized the need to develop a system for ongoing communication with students. Counseling and advisement are strongly reemphasized, and studies show that gains are made in student performance when these services are available.
4. Variable time and variable service programs are being implemented. There is little prospect that a standard application of educational service will move a student who is four or five years behind in academic skills to the necessary achievement for an Associate Degree. Obviously additional service must be provided, and the students who begin with deficiencies should be expected to take longer to complete a program. There are not only developmental courses, but a system which provides appropriate reduction in load (one of the few procedures that shows documented results). Methods have been established for additional support service coordinate with coursework. Further, there will be continued emphasis on the development of faculty skills necessary for effective individualization of instruction. Reduction of the academic range in classes will not eliminate individual differences, rather it is reduced to a workable range. The thrust of the program remains an assistance to individuals.
5. A strong commitment has been made to hold to standards, and implement programs which will ensure adherence to that commitment. It is absolutely essential to the continued existence of the open door that we establish high expectations in awarding credits, certificates or degrees. These are the currency of the institution, and I am convinced that society will ultimately reject the open door and our institution if that currency is not strengthened. Everything will be done to help students to be successful, and to gain from their experiences. However, credits cannot be awarded lightly, and an increased focus on performance and achievement is inherent in all aspects of the program.
6. There must be a point at which it is determined that the student is not going to succeed at the college, and further public investment is not justified. As an essential element of educational reform at Miami-Dade Community College, nearly 8,000 students have been suspended in the last two and

orie-half years. Implementation of the Standards of Academic Progress program represent a drastic change of policy. However, the students are supportive. They appreciate a more directive program, are desirous of receiving advice and support, and exert more care in selection of courses. We are now seeing heartening results. The percentage of students being suspended is declining each term and there is evidence that intervention procedures and early warning (as early as seven credits) bring about improved student performance.

It is essential to this nation that the open door policy of the American community college be retained, but this will happen only if the institutions are willing to undertake systemic redesign of the educational program, even at the serious risk of enrollment decline. Legislators who demand improved quality and higher standards must help by freeing the colleges from the bondage of enrollment-driven funding formulas. I believe we are facing our last opportunity to preserve this basic fundamental of the American community college. At Miami-Dade we are determined to meet the challenge of providing for both equality and quality.

THE EDUCATIONAL REFORM AT MIAMI-DADE COMMUNITY COLLEGE IS RESULTING IN IMPROVED STUDENT PERFORMANCE

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There is now research that indicates that the educational reform underway at Miami-Dade Community College has resulted in significant improvement in student performance.

In 1975 the College began a three-year study of the general education requirements. During the study, other educational issues were raised. There was urgency and persistence to concern for student preparation and performance in mathematics, reading, and writing. The study was expanded to include these and other academic and student support issues. The final recommendations called for systemic reform of the entire educational program. Implementation of the changes began with the Fall Term of 1978, and will be completed during the 1981-82 College Year.

The rationale for the program is straightforward, but was controversial as it was a considerable departure from the practices that have evolved in higher education. To cope with the dilemma of declining academic skills of entering students and determination to strengthen standards, the College is implementing a program that:

- Raises expectation for effort and performance from students.
- Provides students more direction and fewer options as they progress through the college program
- Provides students more feedback regarding progress, and early and continued information on performance problems.
- Provides increased personal and instructional support to those experiencing difficulty.
- Places a focus on academic achievement and performance including expanded opportunities for superior and talented students.
- Clearly sets a point at which a student's performance must demonstrate academic progress in order to remain in the College.

There are now early data on those components of the reform that have been in place for at least one year. These results are heartening—student performance is improving.

1. Despite the initial controversial nature of the changes, students, faculty, and administrators alike now favor the more rigorous program. It is clear that students want more direction and higher goals.
2. Students improve performance when they are alerted early in the term to performance deficiencies. Six weeks into each term, information is collected from the faculty on the performance and attendance of each student. Through a computerized system this information is combined with information in the student file as the basis for individualized letters to each student concerning their current academic progress. In a survey, ninety-three percent of the students indicated that they appreciated this information. In the fall of 1980, of 4,171 students alerted to improve performance, eighty-two percent were able to improve so as to avoid being placed on "academic warning" at the end of the term.
3. Early assistance and more direction for those experiencing difficulty helps students to improve performance. A study of 624 South Campus students, who were experiencing academic difficulty, showed that those who took advantage of the additional assistance showed marked improvement. Their Grade Point Average (GPA) (0-4 scale) increased by .88, while those not availing themselves of the additional services had further GPA decline of .44. In the same study, those students availing themselves of additional assistance had an increase of seventy-four percent in successful course-completion rate, while the others declined further. The improvements were consistent for all ethnic groups.
4. Several data elements indicate that the overall program approach is having positive impact. Two groups of students with poor academic performance were compared. The first group entered before the new systems, and had neither the early warning nor additional assistance. The GPA of this group remained low—1.48, while the group under the new system improved their GPA to 1.94.

   Perhaps the most dramatic evidence of improvement is in the suspension rates which have declined each term. Because of the number of persons already in the system at the time of implementation, the first fair comparison was Fall Term 1979 to Fall Term 1980. The suspension rates of all ethnic groups declined. Most impressive was a forty-four percent decline in suspension rates for black students.
5. The College is discontinuing students when they do not achieve academic progress. In the first two and one-half years of the program, nearly 8,000 students were suspended. When adjusted for those that might have otherwise withdrawn voluntarily, it is estimated that the College enrollment was reduced by approximately five percent, saving over $1,500,000 in state and federal funds each year.